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ABSTRACT

Demographic characteristics, psychological needs, and program needs of a random sample of returning women students at the University of Maryland, College Park, were assessed. The women students were 25 years old or older who had interrupted their studies for at least two years. Of the 288 students who were mailed an anonymous questionnaire, responses were received from 239. An attempt was made to understand some of the dimensions underlying the characteristics and needs of returning women students. Factor analysis revealed eight dimensions for the returning women; interest in special services; the presence of older children in households and their effect on the returning woman; self-confidence and self-concept of the students; the situation of the mature women whose children have left home; dealing with roommates and their relationship to and effect on the returning woman; having young children and demands of child care; student fulfillment; and academic needs (e.g., skill refresher courses, test-taking skills). Particular segments of the population of returning women who had differing needs were identified. While a program for reentry students that provides cohesive support is critical for some returning women, it would be a negative program for others who need more specific services such as financial aid or academic assistance, and who do not want to be singled out or stigmatized as special students. Age of children provided a key variable discriminating among the needs of these students. An important distinction was made between women returning to school for enjoyment as opposed to tolerating school to get a degree or a job. A bibliography is appended. (SW)

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Dimensions Underlying the Characteristics and Needs of Returning Women Students

Diane Adelstein, William Sedlacek and Alyce Martinez

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Summary

With the rise in the number of women students re-entering higher education there has been a rise in the number of programs designed to meet their needs. Little research has been conducted to distinguish the needs of subgroups within the heterogeneous population of returning women students, however. In order to study the underlying dimensions of the needs and characteristics of these women, a random sample of 288 returning women students at the University of Maryland, College Park (UMCP) were sent a questionnaire covering demographic characteristics and psychological and program needs. Factor analysis of the questionnaire items resulted in identifying eight factors underlying the needs and characteristics of these women, such as "Special Services," the presence of "Older Children," and "Self Concept."

For example, the women scoring high on the "Special Services" dimension tended to be older, married women who desired specific services designed for them, while those scoring low on this dimension were younger, presently unmarried, and did not want to distinguish themselves from traditional-aged students. Implications for the design of student services are discussed.

With children of the post-war baby boom now entering their late twenties and early thirties and a decline in the birth rate in recent years, the demographic profile of the United States is slowly shifting from being dominated by youth to being represented primarily by older adults. These shifts in our population are affecting the demographic profile of students entering our colleges and universities; the Carnegie Council on Policy Studies on Higher Education (1980) predicts that by the year 2000 there will be a 23% decline in the enrollment of traditional-age students, those 18-24 years old.

The past decade has seen a dramatic shift in the demographic profile of college students, with an influx of students, particularly women, returning to school after an absence of five years or more. According to the Carnegie Council (1980), within the three year period of 1975 to 1978 alone, the number of women between the ages of 24 and 34 returning to school rose 187%. Women now account for more than two-thirds of all adult students (U.S. Department of Labor, 1979). Benjamin (1979) states that the phenomenon of women re-entering higher education is one that will be with us for years to come.

In order to compensate for the decline in traditional student enrollment, institutions have turned toward the adult student population by actively recruiting them and facilitating their return through the development and expansion of services geared especially for them. But the campus environment itself may not always be supportive. Attitude research supports the notion of "ageism," finding that entering college students hold negative attitudes toward their more mature classmates in a variety of situations (Peabody & Sedlacek, 1981).

The education literature of recent years has seen an explosion of descriptive accounts of programs for returning students in particular colleges and universities. Yet many of these programs are being designed, implemented,

and evaluated without basic appraisal data on the needs of such students. This data may prove to be especially complex, since the returning women population has been described as particularly diverse and heterogeneous, encompassing a wide range of demographic characteristics (Blimline, 1974; Berman et.al., 1977; Smallwood, 1980).

Systematic research in this area concerning the demographic characteristics of re-entry women, their reasons for returning, and the problems they encounter is beginning to accumulate.

Re-entry women are defined as those who interrupted their education, either following high school or at some point during college, for a period of a few years or more. Most of these women range in age from 25 to 50, but as a group vary widely in ethnicity, marital status, social class, and work experience (Project on the Status and Education of Women, 1980).

In the early 1970's the reasons for returning to school most cited by women were personal growth and intellectual fulfillment (Brandenburg, 1974; Geisler & Thrush, 1975). Comparatively fewer women at that time cited the development of job skills as being the most important reason for return (Anderson, 1974; Letchworth, 1970). More recently, economic factors have become the impetus for the return of women to higher education. Women are now more interested in training for careers and expanding their options, rather than upgrading their present employment. This can be seen in shifts from majors in liberal arts to more practical majors like business administration and social work (McCrea, 1979). Muskat (1978), however, suggests that although re-entry women are opting for more job-oriented educational experiences, these continue to reflect traditionally female-dominated occupations.

Much of the recent research on returning women has focused on their problems and attendant needs. Time management, role conflicts, study skills, self-confidence and various other issues were cited by returning women students

as problems or concerns (Karelius-Schumacher, 1977; Lance, Lourie & Mayo, 1979; Smallwood, 1980). Fears of not being able to relate to younger students and new stresses in relationships with family and friends add to these difficulties (Rawlins, 1979; Roach, 1976).

Efforts are now being made to study demographic variables that may distinguish the needs of groups within the heterogeneous re-entry student population. Johnson, Wallace & Sedlacek (1979) examined the practical and psychological needs of returning women in comparison with those of returning men and traditional-age men and women. They found a large number of demographic differences among these four samples, but very few significant differences in their practical and psychological needs. There was wide variation within the returning student group, perhaps masking between-group differences. The researchers suggest that returning students are not a homogeneous population but, rather a group composed of several different subgroups. These researchers found support for this hypothesis through post hoc examination of their data intercorrelations. One set of intercorrelated items depicted an older family woman, needing help with self-confidence, identity issues and practical family problems. Another set seemed to describe a working woman (independent, mobile, well-educated and career-oriented) and another a woman moving up from a less college-oriented background. Although these subgroups are tentative, they suggest that the practical and psychological needs of returning women may depend, in particular, upon four underlying demographic characteristics: age, marital status, employment and socioeconomic level.

If the returning student population can indeed be classified into differentiated subgroups, diverse services could be specifically directed at the different needs of these sub populations. This is a vital consideration in light of the increasing number of programs being proposed for this population, since it is likely that not all returning women benefit equally from these services.

The purpose of this study was to identify the dimensions underlying the needs and characteristics of women returning to school so that we might better understand them and plan for their needs.

Method

A random sample of 288 returning undergraduate women students (ages 25 or older, with at least a two-year interruption in their studies) at the University of Maryland, College Park, were mailed an anonymous questionnaire covering demographic characteristics and psychological and program needs. After follow ups by mail and phone, an 83% return rate (N-239) was achieved.

Results

In an attempt to better understand some of the dimensions underlying the characteristics and needs of returning women students, a principal components factor analysis using squared multiple correlations and varimax rotation of all factors with eigenvalves greater than one was conducted. Differences between women scoring high and low on each factor were analyzed by analysis of variance and chisquare at the .05 level. Eight factors accounted for 90% of the common variance. Factor 1 was labeled "Interest in Special Services," since items concerning special programs, workshops and group experiences for returning women loaded brightest on this factor. Factor 2 related to the presence of "Older Children in Household" and their effect on the returning woman. Factor 3 concerned items measuring the self-confidence and Self-Concept of the students. Factor 4 was called the "Empty Nest" factor since it seemed to represent a mature woman with children who have left home. Factor 5 involved items dealing with "Roommates" and their relationship to and effect on the returning woman. Factor 6 was named "Young Children" and items loading on this factor related to the demands of child care. Factor 7 (Student Fullfillment) contained items relating to schoolwork, being a student and the satisfaction

and positive benefits of that role. Factor 8 was called "Academic Needs" and contained items assessing interests in skills refresher courses, study habits and test-taking skills.

The balance of the results section will be organized according to types of returning women who score particularly high or low on each dimension.

Special Services

Women with a high interest in establishing a cohesive, informative, well-coordinated peer support system through workshops, counseling, advising, and some type of special returning women program tended to be older (over 33) married, with older school-aged children. They had been out of school longer (mean 17 years) and did not have immediate financial concerns.

Women who tended not to be as interested in the special services for returning women described above were single, younger women who preferred to try to blend in with other students, and not be identified with special services or programs. They typically were divorced or separated and had a need for financial help, and off campus placement, particularly for a part-time job. They were also more interested in informal faculty-student interaction than were the women more interested in special returning women services.

Older Children in Household

Women scoring high on this factor were primarily concerned with the effects of their student role on their school age children at home. Role conflict, guilt, difficulties in finding time to study, and concern over being physically able to handle the situation typified these women.

Women scoring low on the factor did not have school age children at home, tended to be single, somewhat younger, and free of the pressures described above.

Self Concept

Women who were high on this factor tended to think well of themselves, were more decisive, independent and self disciplined. They were good at assessing their strengths and weaknesses and had realistic expectations of what they could and could not get from their college experience.

Women low on this factor tended to be depressed, bored, and lonely. They also were often anxious and guilty about something specific such as returning to school or growing old. These women were less clear about their academic or vocational goals and were often reluctant to seek help with their problems.

Empty Nest

Women most identified with this factor were older, with children who were out of school and had left home. They had had a long break in their education. They were less sure of themselves, might not be seeking a degree, but were seeking a variety of special services and tended not to have financial problems.

Women scoring low on this factor had no children or younger children, were more career oriented, and had good academic skills.

Roommates

Women high on this factor tended to be single, and finding a satisfactory living arrangement with someone (female or male) was a primary concern to them. General aspects of the relationship as well as how the roommate supported the school attendance of the returning woman were key concerns.

People scoring low on this variable tended to live alone, were independent, and saw living alone as an advantage in returning to university studies.

Young Children

Women high on this factor tended to have preschool or younger elementary school children and were concerned with day care, and general demands of child

care, and expressed some guilt at not being able to cope better or be with their children more. Class schedules and majors which required a minimum time on campus were issues for them. They tended to spend little time on campus other than in class.

Women scoring low on this factor tended not to have children or had older children. If they did have children, they had child care arrangements or tended to feel that it was important for them to go to school despite problems this might cause for their children or in their relationship with them.

Student Fulfillment

The women scoring highest on this factor tended to enjoy learning and schoolwork and had an intrinsic interest in their major. They tended to be pleased with the arrangements they had made in order to get back into school.

Women scoring low on this factor were concerned primarily with obtaining a degree and a better job. They were willing to work hard to achieve their goals, but often chose a major because of its employment or monetary opportunities. They tended not to enjoy studying or their courses, and would leave school if they could get the same job or one paying the same by not going to school.

Academic Needs

Women highest on this factor felt they needed basic skills, refresher courses, academic skills, counseling, study or office space, and workshops on test-anxiety reduction, time management, test-taking skills and academic advising.

Women lowest on this factor felt they had good study skills and were not interested in programs in these areas. They felt good that they did not need special help, and preferred to identify with the general student body rather than returning students.

DISCUSSION

The results demonstrated that there are a variety of independent dimensions which describe different patterns of characteristics, needs and interests of returning women students. Indeed, each dimension tended to denote a "type" at each extreme of the dimension. One of the programming implications of these results was that we should plan and focus our programs at particular segments of the population of returning women.

As the Special Services factor tells us, a general returning womens' program which provices cohesive support is critical for some returning women, but would tend to be a negative program for others who need more specific services such as financial aid, and don't want to be singled out or stigmatized as special students. Yet another group sees the services they need as academic in nature and do not feel the need for general support to the same degree.

Age of children provided a key variable discriminating among the needs of returning women students. If the children were young, child care and a life focused on the children seems to be typical; older children at home tended to create guilt, physical problems and problems finding study time; while women with grown-up children tended to have a unique set of problems and concerns including doubts about their abilities, but had fewer financial concerns than other women.

The main way in which relations with significant men in their lives came up, was through the factor called "Roommates." Single women concerned with who they were living with had one set of problems, while those living alone had another, and those with spouses were somewhere in between.

An important distinction was made between women who were in school because they enjoyed it and had an intrinsic interest in study, as opposed to women who were "tolerating" school in order to get a degree or a job.

Herzberg's theory of job satisfaction (Herzberg, Mausner and Snyderman, 1959) may be a useful model within which to help us program for returning women. Herzberg felt that there were "satisfiers" and "dissatifiers." Satisfiers tended to be those aspects of a job which were intrinsic to it. If they were absent or reduced, we would be neutral but not dissatisfied. Dissatisfiers came from extrinsic aspects of work such as pay, working conditions, etc. Women primarily motivated by intrinsic aspects of their education may be positive or neutral, but may not run into problems or need help like women who are extrinsically motivated.

It is hoped that this study has provided a basis upon which we can organize our thinking, understanding and programming about women returning to college. As resources dwindle and accountability concerns face everyone, planning our programs to accomplish specific objectives for specific groups may prove more beneficial and cost effective than trying to do too much or provide only a program aimed at returning women in general.

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